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# When the men in blue start feeling blue

## Police officers receive training in how to handle stress and how to ask for help

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Staff Writer

NORTH BRUNSWICK — Clarke Paris walked across the stage cool, calm and relaxed.

"Hey, Clarke," an officer said to him.

"Hey, how are you? ... How's work? ... How's the family? ... Enjoying the weather?" Paris replied.

Then Sgt. Clarke Paris of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police walked across the stage with a swagger: sunglasses on, hands on his hips, chest puffed out.

"Hello, Sarge," an officer said to him.

"Hello, Officer. Be good. Stay out of trouble. Stay safe," Sgt. Paris responded.

Role playing first as an everyday citizen and then as a member of law enforcement, Paris was trying to demonstrate how the public perceives the police, how the police perceive each other and how police officers perceive themselves, Paris said.

This formed the basis of "The Pain Behind the Badge" documentary and seminar, which was offered March 16 and 18 at Middlesex County College in Edison for more than 500 police officers from New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Maryland.

"The Pain Behind the Badge" was developed about four years ago by Paris, who realized that he was suffering mentally from the stress of his job as a 21-year policeman. He said he began his career as a proud, strong cop who thought he was handling his life and work just fine.

He soon realized he was adding to his "cop stew," or "law enforcement cancer," what he described as the accumulation of stress from incidents such as getting run over by a drunken driver when he was a motorcycle cop and being in a situation where 68 rounds were fired and one person died.

"All I knew is, [this job] wasn't impacting me ... because I was handling it," he said of his initial response to the thoughts he was experiencing.

His breaking point came on a 118-degree summer day in the upscale part of Las Vegas. There had been five suicides that day, including one involving an 83-year-old man with terminal cancer, but also one involving a 13-year-old boy who was failing algebra.

"They never bothered me. I put them in that pot of stew," Paris said of suicides in general.

Yet that one day, Paris had gone to one of the homes and heard the family mourning from the kitchen. The mother then clung to him so hard, he said, that her nose ran on his uniform. He put on his cop face, said some things to the mother, and then left the house.

But when he got to his car, he broke down.

"In my whole life I never cried like that," he said.

When a man mowing a lawn nearby came and tapped on his vehicle window and asked if he was OK, Paris said he "never felt so ashamed."

"How dare I accept anyone telling me, 'Thank you?' I felt like a coward," he said, explaining how law enforcement officers feel that they have to be the strongest and the most composed and the best at what they do in order to protect society, and therefore feel as if they should never fail.

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>
> *— Sgt. Clarke Paris, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police*

Now feeling like a weak cop, he spent his time trying to fool everyone in his life into thinking that he was OK emotionally, he said.

Because he had a "great relationship" with his wife and five children, Paris felt prompted to discuss his feelings with his wife, although it took a few weeks to convince himself. He went to his wife in the pool one day and after 45 minutes said to her, "I have to tell you something." Then he broke down like the day of the suicide. His intention was to be a strong man, he said, and say right away, "I think this job is getting to me," but instead he bawled and bawled.

Finally, he and his wife talked for hours, but he said after the pot simmered down, so to speak, he figured he had merely had a weak moment and thought he was OK again.

"Life's good for Clarke Paris," he said.

However, this situation led Paris to reach out to counselors and psychotherapists and to research the topic further for a documentary. He said that there is a plethora of information available to police officers, but that police officers never seek it.

"I asked myself why I didn't accept help years ago," he said. "How come there's all of this help, but cops don't accept it? We think we're the answer, not the problem. Cops, we'll spend life giving ourselves to people, but we will literally die before asking for [help back]."

Paris noted there are different kinds of stress. Stress can be general, in terms of life situations; cumulative, in terms of a chronic state of disturbing stressors that can lead to physical and emotional stress; or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in terms of the buildup of untreated critical-incident stress or trauma.

He said symptoms include grief, depression, sadness, feeling abandoned or isolated, anxiety, guilt, being withdrawn, having nightmares, reliving events, having difficulty concentrating, memory problems, lower back pain, crying, hypersensitivity and other signs.

Stress can lead to a disregard for safety, self-medication, increased drinking or drug use, sick humor, depression, increased absenteeism and contemplating self-destructive actions, Paris said.

Again noting the importance of how something is perceived, Paris said that stress is a normal reaction in a normal person to an abnormal event, but to a cop, stress is an abnormal reaction in an abnormal person to a normal event.

He said cops think stress is normal because they consider it part of their job. However, he said PTSD is an illness that can be managed with professional intervention and has nothing to do with how good an officer you are.

"Perception protection makes cops feel as if they are in control, when in actuality it causes a loss of control," he said, showing a picture of football player Dick Butkus and saying that police officers tend not to

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remove their "gear" when they go home, as opposed to football players who take off their equipment after a game. "It feels good to accept help, especially when you have spent your whole life giving help."

But Paris warned that if these feelings are unresolved, thoughts, and even acts, of suicide tend to occur.

"We know that more cops commit suicide than are killed by assailants," he said — despite statistics that show that 65,000 police officers are assaulted every year, and a police officer is killed in the line of duty every 53 hours throughout the 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country.

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Yet these feelings can first materialize from being falsely accused, making a mistake, being exposed to the daily atrocities of life, betrayal, shame, or even an insignificant event. Paris said drinking, drugs, exercising, sex and occupying your time are only a temporary fix.

"One fight, one day, one shift ... again."

During his presentation, Paris played a graphic, disturbing audio recording of an undercover police officer, "Marty," who was shot during a drug deal. The audience could hear Marty's last breaths, the attempts at CPR and his partner screaming, crying and cursing in the background.

The presentation also included clips from movies like "Rambo" to illustrate post-traumatic stress disorder and "Lethal Weapon" in which Mel Gibson attempts to shoot himself.

Paris also showed a video of himself fighting with an Ohio prison escapee outside a casino in Vegas, during which he thought at one point he had killed the man during the struggle. He said this brings up feelings that non-law-enforcement people may not understand, because even though it's good guy versus bad guy, the person you may potentially kill is still a human being, is still somebody's son, parent, sister or brother.

All the examples were designed to show how almost everyone is susceptible to the effects of tragic incidents that linger in memories, and that only by seeking treatment can the healing process begin and harming oneself be avoided.

Paris also mentioned that not every officer suffers from emotional distress.

"Some cops just have that chip that lets them see bad stuff and they're OK. It doesn't make them a better cop, it doesn't make them a worse cop. It makes them fortunate. They don't have that anguish," he said, noting that it is the exception rather than the rule.

Yet all in all, Paris said that after his lectures, which he holds throughout the year along with his wife, Tracie, he is "amazed how many cops have come up to say, 'That was me.' " He said cops don't speak about their issues but usually have common thoughts and feelings.

He also said that anyone, from any background, should seek help when feeling any persistent amount of stress.

"I just hope if they're struggling they don't think, 'It's just me,' and they call someone," he said.

**Tracie Paris, a registered nurse for 25 years, spoke about her personal experiences as the wife of a police officer.**

The program was sponsored by the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office, the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders, the Middlesex County Police Chiefs Association, and MAGLOCLEN (Middle Atlantic-Great Lakes Organized Crime Law Enforcement Network), a multistate information-sharing system for members of law enforcement.

The seminar was an idea developed by North Brunswick Police Director Kenneth McCormick, who was looking for different training options after a member of his department committed suicide in June. McCormick spoke with other department heads and then the county prosecutor, ultimately leading to funding and a location for the seminar.

"I don't think we expected it to become that big, but we encouraged it around the county, and as the message got out, we started getting calls," McCormick said. "It's a serious problem in law enforcement and we realized we needed to start some proactive training."

There are other resources available to struggling officers, such as Cop2Cop and the Employee Assistance Program, but this was the first large-scale training provided locally.

For more information, visit www.thepainbehindthebadge.com.

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